

In brief

Agency sets up tonsil archive: The Health Protection Agency has set up a National Anonymous Tonsil Archive to collect 100 000 pairs of tonsils that have been removed. Abnormal prion proteins, which can cause variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), can be found in samples of tonsil tissue. The database will help establish how many people in the United Kingdom are carrying the disease.

India bans diabetes drug: India's drugs controller general has finally banned the manufacture, sale, and distribution of the diabetes drug phenformin—citing potential risk to humans. It was withdrawn from the US market in the late 1970s following a lawsuit and protests.

Scotland offers choice in outpatient appointments: Patients in Scotland have been given access to a national waiting times database through the internet. They can check outpatient waiting times at more than 3000 hospital clinics. The database is available at www.show.scot.nhs.uk/waiting

Antibody indicates risk of rheumatoid arthritis: In patients with undifferentiated arthritis, testing for a specific type of antibody can identify those at high risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis, the results of a new study show. Autoantibodies to cyclic citrullinated peptides (which can be identified in a new serological test), in contrast with rheumatoid factor, are specific for rheumatoid arthritis. The findings were presented at the 2003 conference of the American College of Rheumatology.

Anaesthetist accused of infecting patients: Dr Sergei Pontus, an anaesthetist at Soroka University Medical Centre, in Beersheba, Israel, has been charged by Israel's southern district attorney's office of intentionally misusing a dangerous drug to which he had become addicted and of causing harm with aggravated intent. Dr Pontus is accused of injecting himself with penthanil and then using the same syringe on patients before their operations. At least 31 of them became infected with hepatitis C.

Study shows that oral steroids are no more effective than placebo for viral wheeze in children

Susan Mayor *London*

A short course of oral steroids is no more effective than placebo in reducing respiratory symptoms in children with viral wheeze and in reducing hospital admissions, a randomised trial has shown (*Lancet* 2003;362:1433-8).

The study involved more than 200 children aged between one and five years who had been admitted to hospital with severe viral wheezing. They were randomised to a five day course of the oral steroid prednisolone (20 mg once daily for five days) or placebo the next time they had virally induced wheezing. The children's parents were told to give their children the randomised treatment at the first sign of an attack of viral wheeze.

The outcome data for 120 (78%) of the 153 children who had another episode of viral wheeze showed no difference in daytime or night time symptom scores, which were based on symptom diaries completed by the parents. The parents had been trained in completing the diaries while their child was in hospital.

The mean daytime symptom score was 0.95 (scores ranged from 0 for no symptoms to 3 for severe symptoms) in the prednisolone group and 0.96 in the placebo group (difference of -0.01 (95% confidence interval -0.22 to 0.20), while the mean night time scores were 0.92 and 0.82 (difference 0.10 (-0.12 to 0.32)).

Use of salbutamol was also similar in the two groups: the mean number of actuations was

1.59 in the prednisolone group and 1.66 in the placebo group (ratio of geometric means 0.93 (0.65 to 1.32)). The proportion of children who were admitted to hospital was higher in the prednisolone group (6/52 (12%)) than in the placebo group (2/69 (3%)), though not significantly ($P=0.058$).

Jonathan Grigg, senior lecturer in paediatric respiratory medicine at the University of Leicester, said: "Current British guidelines for the management of asthma in preschool children suggest that patients may be provided with a course of oral steroids to treat further episodes of viral wheeze.

"Our findings suggest that this strategy may need to be re-evaluated, because there are no clear benefits of oral steroids in children with viral wheeze to offset potential risks."

He proposed that other asthma drugs—including high dose bronchodilators and leucotriene receptor antagonists—may be better treatments for viral wheeze than oral steroids. □

Three quarters of Russia's prisoners have serious diseases

Jane Burgermeister *Vienna*

Three quarters of prisoners in Russia have a serious disease such as tuberculosis and AIDS or another illness, the country's ministry of justice admitted last month.

About 74 000 prisoners are infected with tuberculosis, 36 000 are HIV positive, 26 000 have syphilis, and 1500 have hepatitis, said Alla Kusnezowa, deputy director of the ministry's department for sentence execution.

Also, a third of the country's 820 000 prisoners have mental health problems, and almost all prisoners take drugs.

The grim statistics highlight the poor conditions that prevail in Russia's prisons more than 10 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Human

rights campaigners warn that overcrowding, malnutrition, and lack of hygiene have made prisons a breeding ground for disease.

Part of the problem is that the prison authorities cannot afford the drugs to keep the diseases at bay. Shortages of drugs mean that prisoners with tuberculosis usually do not complete their course of treatment, leading to drug resistant strains. About 30 000 prisoners are estimated to have multidrug resistant tuberculosis.

Health experts also warn that the tens of thousands of infected inmates who are released each year are carrying tuberculosis to the rest of the population. Russia is thought to have 342 000 active cases of tuberculosis, and the number of new cases reported in 2001 was 133 000.

The risk of a tuberculosis epidemic comes at a time when the country's health service is in crisis, universal free access to high quality health care has disappeared, and regional clinics are severely underfunded.

In a first step to improve conditions in prisons Russian authorities have taken action to reduce overcrowding. □



Prisoners take TB medicine in Abagor Lesnoy, Russia